The folk zoology of Southeast Asian wildmen. [Review of the book Images of the wildman in Southeast Asia. An anthropological perspective, G. Forth, 2008]

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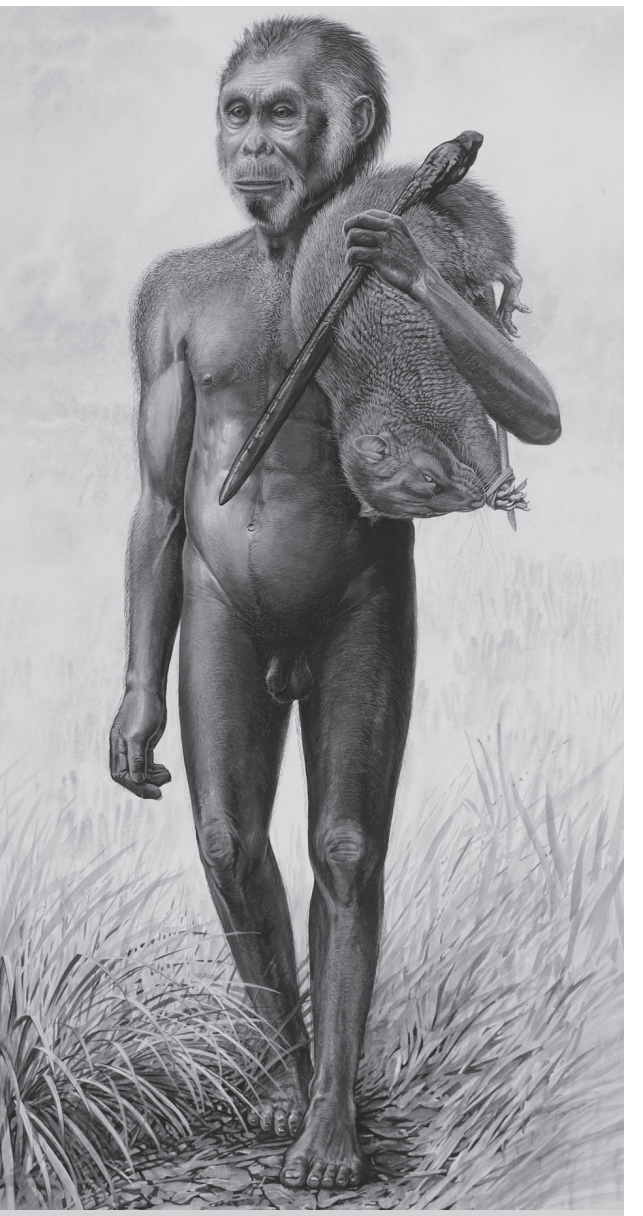
The folk zoology of Southeast Asian wildmen



Hairy humanlike creatures occur in many local systems of knowledge worldwide. In his latest book, anthropologist Gregory Forth explores explores the structure and sources of such representations, with special attention to the Flores *'ebu gogo'* and its possible relationship to *Homo floresiensis*.

Raymond Corbey

Forth, Gregory, 2008.
Images of the wildman in Southeast Asia. An anthropological perspective.
London and New York: Routledge. xv + 343 pages.
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GREGORY FORTH IS AN OXFORD-TRAINED social anthropologist and professor of anthropology at the University of Alberta. He has conducted extensive fieldwork on the Indonesian islands of Flores and Sumba, in a broadly structuralist and interpretivist vein. With an in-depth study of how the Nage of Flores categorise and otherwise relate to birds (Forth 2004) he has established himself as one of the few specialists worldwide in ethnotaxonomy and ethnozoology, the study of indigenous perceptions and dealings with the natural world. In the present book he applies this expertise to an intriguing category of hairy hominoid creatures called *ebu gogo* with whom the Nage claim to have shared their landscape until they were wiped out by humans a few generations ago. He contextualises these representations in terms of – at first sight – similar convictions in many places in Southeast Asia and beyond, from Sumatra and Sri Lanka to Madagascar, Europe, and northwestern North America. Forth was a Senior Fellow at IIAS in 2005-06 where he convened a Master class on the subject matter of the present book in February 2006.

Forth criticises the tendency of anthropologists to automatically deal with such claims in terms of fantastic, imaginary beings belonging to the spiritual world, reflecting social structure and expressing symbolic meaning, while not giving serious attention to the alternative that such entities may be partly grounded in empirical realities. He does so all the more because the Nage themselves, with their extensive, highly detailed knowledge of the surrounding natural world, clearly treat the *ebu gogo* as another animal of the forest, and not as another member of the spirit world. *Images of the wildman in Southeast Asia* continuously seeks a balance between natural history and folklore, Darwinian evolutionary and Durkheimian folk taxonomy, cognitivist and constructivist views approaches in ethnozoology.

Mysterious primate?
Forth compares the Nage *ebu gogo* to the Sumatran *orang pendek* ('short man'), reported frequently by both Europeans and locals in colonial times, and to the European wildman, among other characters. He argues that in the case of Sumatra the claims may partly or entirely relate to sightings of orangutans, gibbons, sun bears, or Kubu hunter-gatherers living in the forests. But he keeps an open mind as to the possibility of an as yet unknown primate, as, by the way, do several well-established primatologists on the basis of their fieldwork in Sumatra. An unknown larger mammal is not as odd as it may seem in view of discoveries of quite a few new species of deer, ox, antelope, primate (!), rodent, bat, bird, etc. in recent decades – a trend which biologists expect to continue. In fact, over 400 new species of mammal have been discovered and named since 1993. Zoogeographically, in Flores, which lies east of the Wallace Line, there are no great apes, nor modern human food collectors like the Kubu, just long-tailed macaques which are much too familiar to the local population to be confused with anything else, animal, human, or spirit.

Ebu gogo and some other representations on Flores have been given a new twist by the discovery of *Homo floresiensis* in 2003, very probably a new species of hominid only between 13,000 and 18,000 years old. *Homo floresiensis* is very different from *Homo sapiens* and probably much closer to either *Homo erectus* or the australopithecines. Living in caves and standing only a bit more than a metre tall when adult – as a result of island dwarfism – it is uncannily similar to the *ebu gogo,* but cultural reminiscences spanning thirteen millennia are highly improbable. Did this non-sapiens hominid primate perhaps survive well into historical times, as Nage lore claims for *ebu gogo?* Or are these reminiscences of a small-stature, modern human negrito population at the basis of this image?

Man of the woods
Yet another relevant figure in Forth's worldwide comparative survey is the European *homo sylvestris,* literally man of the woods. While there are a number of similarities with southeast asian beings in this case too, the roots of the imagery may be quite idiosyncratic. A European tradition of literary and artistic topoi situating hairy humanoids in woods and caves is rooted in antiquity and carries Christian overtones. In more recent centuries it influenced interpretations of great apes, non-western peoples, early hominids, and, indeed, scholarly interpretations of non-European wildman. Next to this, pre-Christian rural representations persisted which situated similar figures in the woods and mountainous regions of Europe. Woodwoses, green men, *pilosi* (hairy creatures) and the like occur frequently in paintings and engravings, on cathedrals, and in heraldic coats-of-arms, typically armed with a huge club.

In Forth's conclusions to this well-written, solid, groundbreaking exercise in ethnozooology and comparative epistemology two remarkable things stand out. First there is his unorthodox, refreshing openness to the possibility that the various hominoid figures he studies are not completely fictitious but are derivative of empirical realities, with some accretion of fantastic elements. Secondly, and complimentarily, in view of the resemblances between images from many parts of the world, he stresses the possibility of the wildman as a pan-human or universal image, 'a universal archetype of human thought existing quite independently of empirical referents' (p. 205). This certainly is an important point, although 'archetype' sounds a bit vague and too Jungian. Forth points to the possibility of connecting more massively than the framework of the present book permits to recent work in cognitive anthropology and evolutionary psychology on universally human cognitive dispositions, along the lines of, for example, Pascal Boyer, Scott Atran, and Dan Sperber. It is input from this side indeed that can be expected to give a new twist to ethnotaxonomy in general.

ABOVE LEFT: **Gregory Forth talking to Nage villagers, 2008. Courtesy of University of Alberta.**
ABOVE RIGHT: **A reconstruction of Homo floresiensis, courtesy of artist Peter Schouten and the National Geographic Society, with permission of the University of Wollongong.**
ABOVE INSET: **The Fight in the Forest, ink drawing by Hans Burgkmair, c. 1510.**

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